

A CRITIQUE ON THE APPLICATION OF FLASHBACK AS A UNIQUE NARRATIVE TOOL IN 'BELOVED' BY TONY MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

Flashback, as a tool, has been animated by miscellaneous authors from the days of yore to enumerate their stories efficaciously. Writers employ diverse modus of operandi to conjugate the chain of events together to magnetise the readers. Such strains are applied by authors as an innovation in their narrative fashion. Tony Morrison is one among them to master the craft and exceeded the horizon by adding more flavour to the narrative technique in her most of her writings. Morrison's novels are dominated by flashback effects. She has manipulated the technique to bring out the best of her works. This paper focuses on the narrative technique used by the author in her novels and to critically analyse her craftsmanship.

KEYWORDS: Narrative, Technique, Flashbacks, Modus of Operandi, Craftmanship & Domination etc...

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is one of the specialists in story telling through which she has silenced many contemporary writers as well as readers. Her novels are revolutionary and most of her novels focused on black community. Her technique of swirling her narration back and forth gives more life to her novels. Her novel *Beloved* swims like a garden pond full of flashbacks and memories of the days of the past. Each memory is like a drop of wine, and when one person brings up enough drops, a trickle of a stream is formed. The flashbacks picture the characters in her novels for an impressive thought to the readers and through this she implies that there is no present without the past. The repetitious nature of the narration helps the reader to associate parts of the text that were separately joined to form relationships. For instance, every time a new character is introduced, the readers are moved back into the memory of another character, to identify the new comers' connection to the story. Predominantly, a new person would be simply introduced with their prominence to the here and now of a story, instead of the shared history amongst other characters. In this novel, Toni Morrison crafted the art to catch the reader's attention and help the reader live with the past. Without a lot of the back-story and the horrors each character faced, the story would be incomplete. We are mesmerised with the story and the characters through the use of flashbacks at regular intervals of the novel which keeps us engaged with the story alive till the end to give a feeling of completeness. It also allows the reader to see how the characters have lived through the horrors of slavery.

FLASHBACKS ATTRACTS THE READERS

Technically, Toni Morrison's novel is very much dominated by the application of flashbacks and

memories. This is evident from the very beginning of the novel when the narrator tells of Howard and Buglar's escape from 124:

"The sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old".

The flashbacks chain a number of events and incidents in this novel such as how Baby Suggs craved colour, her death, and even the tiny elements about the entity that haunts 124. The way the novel kicks off in the beginning gives the readers bits and pieces of information and demands readers' desire to learn more about the story which is evident when Morrison writes about the entity that haunts 124:

"Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut . . ."

Toni Morrison describes us how a baby suffered an unanticipated violent death who is haunting the house. Who cut the baby's throat? And why it was done? And why this baby haunts 124? Morrison embarks these questions at the inception of the novel to kindly the readers' inquisitiveness and probe further reading. The narrator tells us that the boy was murdered violently and now the boy's soul is haunting the house. Morrison gives a realistic picture about how the boy suffered the tortures and his unfortunate death.

FLASHBACKS CONNECTS THE PAST WITH THE PRESENT

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison broke the classical time circle and the linear structure in which the past and the present are juxtaposed. The swapping of the past with present serves to stress the thought that the past is still breathing in the present. In demanding the readers to collect the pieces together, Morrison strains herself to view about them and consider the value of each. From a traditional perspective, Morrison's craftsmanship, in this regard, is nothing short of breathtaking. The text covers various levels of the past, from the slave ship to Sweet Home, as well as the present. Most of the time, the past is recited in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly expressed, as if it were happening in the present as Morrison frequently uses the present tense. The whole text of *Beloved* is split into Parts. There are smaller sections in each part. Almost each section has got flashback episodes. Flashbacks could be used at the beginning of a story or at the end of the story and sometimes even in the middle of the story. The speaker of the story decides exactly where to use flashbacks appropriately to bridge the pieces of stories in an adept manner. For example, when *Beloved* and Denver are discussing about Seth and Amy's encounter as well as Denver's birth

FLASHBACKS TO BETTER DESCRIBE THE PAST

Toni Morrison manipulates the time sequence and makes the past to interact with the present. She has employed two types of time order to narrate the story. The first one is the past time scheme which revolves around 1850's when Sethe was brought to Sweet Home, and the other is the current time order which centres on 1873.

Flashbacks are used constantly throughout the entire novel, forcing the reader to stay engaged in both the story's past and present. One example out of many can be seen when *Beloved* and Denver are talking about Sethe and Amy's encounter and Denver's birth. "'Tell me,' Beloved said. 'Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat'". Denver begins to recount the story as she remembers it from what Sethe told her, but then, with the help of Beloved, she begins to see and feel what Sethe felt as she tells the story. The paragraph breaks and a flashback begin. All of the important characters in *Beloved* are attached to their past in some way, and many of the main events are fuelled by the past. Therefore, in order to better understand the novel, the reader has to truly experience the past. This scene is one of many that help the reader with

this; the flashback pulls the reader into the past and describes the events in much greater detail than Denver's storytelling ever could.

FLASHBACKS KEEPS THE READER ENGAGED WITH THE PAST

A further example of linking the present to the past is shown later in her novels. As Paul D sits on the church steps, he recalls much about Sweet Home. While this flashback is introduced slightly different from the previously mentioned example, it has the same effect. Paul D's thoughts drift to memories of the escape from Sweet Home:

"Sixo, hitching up the horses, is speaking English again and tells Halle what his Thirty-Mile Woman told him"

When the flashback begins, the tense that was used in the movie conversation jumps from past to present tense. This effectively immerses the reader in Paul D's memory by making the events seem like they are happening in real-time, emphasizing the importance of his memories and keeping the reader engaged with the past.

Morrison catalyzes a bond between the characters and the readers because the flashbacks render the readers to relieve the past incidents which the characters experienced and paves way to comprehend why the characters made those choices. It's only the flashback which gets the readers understand how Paul had the tobacco tin and what caused him to have it. The hard experiences that the characters undergo leave the readers puzzled. But Morrison makes the present and the past happen simultaneously for the reader, so they understand how much every character is reminded of and impacted by their past on a regular basis. It is not easy for the readers to understand the struggles of each character that is why Morrison inserts the flashback at regular intervals to chain the connectivity of the events and characters.

CONCLUSIONS

Morrison's pieces involve many aspects of narratology, but the use of analepses is one of the most prominent ways that Morrison both hooks the reader's interest at the beginning of *Beloved* and keeps the reader connected with the past throughout the novel. *Beloved* is shown as an allegorical figure. It doesn't matter if she is Sethe's mother or Sethe's daughter, or a representative of all of slavery victims, *Beloved* reflects the past returned to haunt the present. Toni Morrison has manipulated the flashback tool mainly to allow the readers to understand the relationships between characters. The story would have been incomplete if she does not employ horrors and flashbacks. Moreover, it engages the readers to see how all the characters have evolved through the horrors of slavery. This makes the readers get stuck with the story till the end and that this story would be a history book rather than a personal narrative.

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